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# THOUGHTS ON PRAYER.

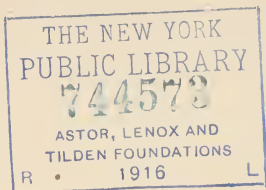
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BY

THOMAS K. CONRAD, D.D.



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## INTRODUCTORY NOTE.

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THE following pages, though they attempt to set forth the Power of Prayer, and to suggest how that power may be utilized in the spiritual life, are not intended as an argument to convince those who deny the direct efficacy of supplication, but only as a reminder to the believer, of the sufficient grounds on which his faith may rest, in its approaches to the throne of grace. The writer has not hesitated, therefore, to use Holy Scripture in proof and illustration, in a way to which the child of God will at once assent, but which, in controversy with a rationalist, might perhaps need further defense and justification. Still less has he avoided the suggestion of those practical thoughts, which may be of use to the general reader, even when familiar and commonplace, but which would be entirely out of place, in a book expected to have an apologetic value.

NEW YORK, *September*, 1874.

ROY W. WOOD  
1911  
W. W. WOOD

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Almighty and everlasting God, who art always more ready to hear than we to pray, and art wont to give more than either we desire or deserve; pour down upon us the abundance of Thy mercy, forgiving us those things whereof our conscience is afraid, and giving us those good things which we are not worthy to ask, but through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

# THOUGHTS ON PRAYER.

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## CHAPTER I.

### THE EFFICACY OF PRAYER.

*“The Lord is nigh unto all them that call upon Him; yea all such as call upon Him faithfully. He will fulfil the desire of them that fear Him. He also will hear their cry and will help them.”* (PSALM cxlv. 18, 19.)

THESE words of the Psalmist—so full of child-like trust, in a near and helping God—express a certainty of faith, unhappily by no means universal in these latter days. It is true that the gross and unscientific objections to religion, which seemed formidable a century ago, are now practically obsolete, so that many of our books of “Evidences” are

of little use, except as monuments of dead and almost forgotten controversies. But this is only because new issues are continually presented, and old questions are ever taking new forms. The conflict has only been transferred to other quarters of the field, and the subtleties of modern thought are quite as antagonistic to Gospel truth, even when presented with the appearance of outward respect for its forms and doctrines, as the most determined attacks of those who made no secret of their wish to overthrow it.

Scepticism, in one form or another, has always existed, and the world can never hope to be free from it. This is our intellectual probation, just as the attractions of sin are permitted for moral discipline. "Yea hath God said!" was the earliest temptation of Satan; "The light shineth in darkness and the darkness comprehended it not," was the inspired comment upon the ministry of

the Divine Master; and the mournful question, "When the Son of Man cometh shall He find faith on the earth?" is our Lord's own witness that the possibility of doubting shall continue to the end.

It will be evident to all who have watched the current of modern thought that the doubts of the present age are taking forms which may well excite the gravest apprehension—not indeed of the ultimate victory of truth—but of the safety of individual souls. What was once the cavil of the unbeliever is now presented, not as an objection to the historic faith, but as the honest development of it, by clearer light and wider knowledge, so that it becomes the earnest and anxious question of faithful souls who honestly desire to know and hold the truth, and are startled to find that the cherished convictions of the past are slipping, one by one, away. The danger is too plain to be denied, and too serious to be ignored.

Never did men need to offer the disciples' prayer, "Lord, increase our faith," with more earnest and passionate sincerity. The average sentiment, or what is familiarly called "the spirit of the age," no longer holds to fundamental doctrines with any firm or nervous grasp. The peril is no longer external to the Church. Even there, the sphere of reason encroaches constantly on that of faith. Men are growing impatient of dogmatic truth. Doctrines must prove their right to be believed, and the progress of destructive criticism threatens to obscure almost every single truth which the Church has held from the beginning.

The *efficacy* of prayer is therefore the first question that presents itself for our consideration in these pages, for unless we can believe that God will really "reward those who diligently seek Him," by an actual and personal attention to their requests, all questions of the methods of devotion or of the subject-



ive influence of supplication are worse than useless.

It is well to remember, at the outset, that the old faith in the power of prayer, is only a single point of an attack, now making, along the whole line of Christian doctrine. Modern objections to prayer are but a part of a plan of battle devised for the overthrow of the entire system of revealed truth. We are told, not only that we must revise our estimate of its efficacy, but it is also claimed that our views of inspiration must be re-adjusted, our estimate of the guilt and penalty of sin, and therefore of the scope of the Atonement, must be corrected, and especially that the doctrine of the eternity of future punishment must be relegated to those darker ages when men had not yet learned to credit the promise of Satan, "Ye shall not surely die." In a word, the whole system of dogmatic truth must re-crystallize in a new and better form.

There need be no fear, of course, as to the ultimate results of all these conflicts. The promise has been given that the gates of hell shall not prevail against the Church. The present age is rationalistic only as another age has been indifferent, and a third superstitious. "The Lord is mindful of his own," and will guard the truth which it has pleased Him to reveal. A few years hence, the dangers of the Church will probably be quite different from those which assail it now. But still we must remember that these are *our* contests, and that the duty of watchfulness, which shall always rest on all believers, takes the special form, with us, of vigilance against this spirit of doubt and questioning, which tends to unloose our moorings from the old faith, and to leave us to drift, without chart or compass, over broad and misty seas of unbelief.

The fundamental question in reference to prayer is then the question of *what*

*prayer is*, and of the *actual results* which are to be expected from it.

Modern criticism recognizes the instinct of supplication, and gives various explanations of it. In the lowest view, prayer is but "the instinct to pour out the feelings in sound," quite analogous to the wail of "the mother who has lost her young," or even to "the bitter cry of the hare when the greyhound is almost upon her." In natural sequence of such a view as this, it is gravely proposed to test its efficacy by actual statistics.

When this view is too shocking for acceptance, we are told that prayer may indeed be a religious act, a proper acknowledgment of our relative weakness ; that it may even secure spiritual blessings, by its transforming power over our own sentiments and feelings, but that, in the stern presence of natural laws, which have been discovered to be immutable, it is idle to expect that it can alter in

the least degree, our relations to the world around us. Our supplications, as they kindle the fervor of our spirits, or cause us to subordinate our wills to God's will, may indeed alter our relations to God, but we are warned against supposing, for an instant, that they can possibly alter God's relation to us.

What is common to these views of prayer, is that they utterly deny the possibility of any real communication between man and God, and therefore the possibility of God acting for us, in recognition of our approach to Him in supplication. We are no longer to believe that there is a listening ear to hear us, and a loving Father's heart to respond to our requests. And thus they are in direct contrast with the doctrine which has been the stay and comfort of believers through all the ages. For by the old faith prayer is the actual communication of the soul with God, so that the hearing God is believed to be just as real as the praying spirit. Blessings,

temporal and spiritual, which would have been withheld if no supplication had been offered, are supposed to come, because of prayer and in answer to it. In fine, prayer is asserted to be a real power with God which He has pledged himself to recognize, equally in the sphere of nature and of grace.

There can be no question as to which theory of prayer is the more consoling ; the only question is whether we are authorized to expect this access to the Father's love and presence, or whether modern thought, and the recent discoveries of science, compel us to give up the blessedness of our old communion with God.

The late discussions of this question have scarcely given sufficient prominence to the argument from Holy Scripture. So long as it cannot be asserted that we have discovered all the possibilities of God's providence, we are bound in honesty to take the assertions of His word as evidence of fact, not

to be controverted, except by direct and obvious contradiction in His other revelations in nature or in ourselves. Nothing less than an actual, scientific demonstration of the impossibility of an accepted prayer, can weigh against a definite promise to hear it. The suggestion of a difficulty, or a doubt, or an objection, is not sufficient, since the promise is presumptive evidence that the difficulty is in the limitation of our view, and not in any limitation of God's power. We shall have occasion, hereafter, to examine how far the objection of modern science can claim to demonstrate the uselessness of prayer; at present it is sufficient to remember that until that demonstration shall be as clear and indisputable as the conclusions of geometry, we are fully justified in taking the words of Holy Scripture in their literal meaning, and assuming that the difficulties which science has suggested, will eventually be removed by new dis-

coveries. The history of science proves that a plausible theory may be very different from an actual demonstration.

Now the promises to prayer, in the Bible, are frequent, clear and emphatic. They depend on no uncertain interpretation, and cannot be explained away by the most skillful criticism. Besides precepts commanding us to pray, each one of which implies, of course, that the way of access to God is open to the supplicant, there are almost numberless examples, in which the actual blessing asked for is linked with the special prayer, and made dependent on it. Thus (to quote only one or two illustrations) we have our Lord's own words, "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you." (St. Matt. vii. 7.) And again, St. James writes, "Ye have not, because ye ask not," and he adds, as if in anticipation of the whole range of objections of those who fail to secure a re-

sponse, because they pray coldly, or foolishly, or irreverently—"Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss." (St. James, iv. 2, 3.) The promises, in the Old Testament, are equally clear. The prophet is inspired to write, "Before they call, I will answer: and while they are yet speaking, I will hear." (Isaiah lxxv. 24.) And, most significantly, the message was sent to Daniel, that the revelation made to him by the angel, was the direct result of his supplication, "At the beginning of thy supplications the commandment came forth, and I am come to shew thee." (Daniel ix. 23.) It would be but waste time to multiply proofs of a fact, evident even to the careless reader of Holy Scripture; but there is one other which may be added on account of its formal reference to those temporal influences, asserted to be so specially beyond the sphere of prayer. It is the promise to King Solomon after the dedication of the Temple. The Lord had



appeared to him, and, graciously accepting the house dedicated to His service, He said, "If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, *and will heal their land.*" (2 Chron. vii. 14.) Here the promise of temporal blessings, dependent on natural law, is given in express terms. Not only was sin to be forgiven, but the barrenness of the land was to be removed, by rain from heaven, and all the special influences required to secure abundant harvests.

To these promises, it is only fair to add the recorded examples, in which blessings, of every sort, are attributed to the power of faithful prayer. There is a chain of such examples, extending all through the Bible. Men, in different ages, in varied stations, of greater or less attainment, surrounded by almost every conceivable combination of

circumstances, are represented as having prevailed with God in prayer, and as having received different gifts, according to their necessities, because they sought for them in supplication, and trusted God's power to bestow them. Here again there is a wealth of illustration, and we must content ourselves with selecting a few examples. It seems almost as though the Holy Spirit designed to associate some special victory of prayer with every separate age of the Church's history, to prove that the Lord's hand was never shortened that it could not save, nor His ear heavy that it could not hear. Thus, in Patriarchal days, the healing of Abimelech is recorded as the fruit of Abraham's supplication. Again, at the beginning of the Mosaic dispensation, the great lawgiver prayed, and the Egyptian plagues came, or were removed. He prayed again, and the Red Sea was divided, so that the people might

pass over. He prayed once more, and the fire which was devastating the camp at Taberah was subdued. Thus Hannah prayed, and Samuel was given to her supplication. Thus Elias prayed, "And it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit." Thus Hezekiah prayed, and his life was lengthened. Thus Nehemiah prayed, and the Jews, delivered already by prayer from Egyptian bondage, were brought again from the captivity at Babylon. Thus St. Stephen prayed, and Saul of Tarsus became an apostle. Thus St. Paul prayed, and the prison doors were opened. And so the glorious record continues. The victories of prayer are inscribed on every fold of the flag which the soldiers of the cross are bearing in their battle with the hosts of evil. God has graciously made the fulfilment of His promise

a truth of history, so that to doubt it, is to doubt His own inspired word, and to deny the recorded history of the Church.

It is quite true that there are also examples of supplications which seem to have met with no immediate response. There are others where the answer has been given in a way somewhat different from that which the suppliant expected. But it is to be remembered, that God has Himself prepared us for these exceptions, both by announcing that there are conditions which must be fulfilled in our prayers, before He will hear them, and by reserving His right to supplement our ignorance by His own greater wisdom. He has told us that there are certain things—as, for example, sin, hypocrisy, coldness, malice—which insulate us, as it were, from Him, so that the electric spark of His grace cannot come to us; and He has told us that our requests may also be denied in love. His promise has been lim-

ited by conditions, plainly announced, which must be taken into account, in our theory of prayer. These exceptions, therefore, are in themselves a proof of its efficacy ; for if it can be shown, as it certainly can be, that there is no example, either in the Bible, or in the experience of all the multitude of believers, of an unanswered prayer, where God's apparent silence cannot be explained either by the failure of some condition, on the part of the suppliant, which was clearly announced as necessary, or in the pursuance of some loving purpose, on his behalf, then it follows that the exceptions themselves are evidence of the truth of the Christian theory of prayer, and foundations for the believer's faith to rest upon.

The scriptural argument will not, of course, convince the unbeliever, but it will surely satisfy the child of God and drive from his heart any lingering question of God's loving presence, suggested in the

darker hours of his spiritual experience. He knows that in commanding prayer, God has promised to bow down His ear to hear it. In the word of God he finds examples of gracious answers to suppliants in every age, and remembering that He to whom he prays is "the same yesterday, to-day, and forever," he too draws near the mercy-seat, confident that the changeless God is listening to his cry. If the answer comes not while he prays, he remembers that God has graciously explained the hindrances which, now and then, seem to make the supplications of His children ineffectual, and in the darkness he can still trust the promise "Thus saith the Lord," and can believe that "He will fulfill the desire of them that fear Him; that He also will hear their cry and will help them."

## CHAPTER II.

### THE EFFICACY OF PRAYER—IMMUTABLE LAW.

*“The waves of the sea are mighty, and rage horribly; but yet the Lord who dwelleth on high is mightier.”* (PSALM xciii. 5.)

THE proof of the power of prayer, furnished by the direct promises of Holy Scripture, rests upon authority, and though that authority be divine, it must submit, in this age of active—and not very reverent—thought, to be tested by experience and by induction from any facts of the material world, which seem to bear upon the question. It may be quite sufficient to the believer, to know that God is a Father, who has promised to hear His children’s cry, but “all men have not faith,” and what

will satisfy the child of God, will not necessarily convince the world. The argument must therefore be carried beyond the range of mere authority. And this may be done, without the slightest fear of the result. Truth is always consistent. The God who gave the promises of Scripture, is the same God who made the world, and impressed His laws upon it, and gave us faculties to discover and investigate them. So far as our interpretations of the Bible are correct, and our science is exact and thorough, both are in accord. Our perplexities are from our ignorance, and not from our knowledge, and in proportion to our progress they will disappear, until we shall find that subtle and unexpected harmonies exist, between apparently opposing facts, and learn that truth is one, even as God is one.

We may therefore expect to find indications of the efficacy of prayer entirely inde-



pendent on Revelation. In this we are not disappointed. There is, in the first place, a natural impulse to prayer, which indicates an innate conviction of its necessity, and proves an instinctive faith in its power. This is so universal, that it would be absurd to trace it to education or tradition, or priestly influence. It has existed in every age, in every land, at every time of life. It is one of those innate convictions analogous to the instincts of the lower orders, and like them, is equivalent to the voice of God. The little child, when the mother first places him upon his knees, and bids him look to God and ask Him for all that he needs, takes the precept as a thing of course, and although the idea of a spiritual presence is one of the most abstract and perplexing which can be presented to the human mind, he never doubts that the unseen God is bending down and listening to the request. Nor is the truth received solely on authority. As the

child grows older, and the activities of his mind begin to develop, he will ask the reason of ten thousand things, but never will he ask why he is told to pray. He will question the propriety of many of the parental commands, and will resist authority even in his infancy, but he will not question the need of praying to the Father in the heavens, at least not until the world and sin have had time to wear off the freshness of his early faith. Prayer is an instinct, and he instinctively obeys it, and expects an answer.

The same instinct asserts itself among those who have no knowledge of the Christian system, and have been entirely separated from all Christian influence. Go where he will, the missionary can never find a prayerless people. He may need to tell them "that the God whom they ignorantly worship, Him he declares unto them." He may find the idea of prayer debased with superstition, but even superstitions have

been powerless to destroy it. His first work is not to teach devotion, but to purify it, and to direct it to the proper object. The heathen, in their idolatry, know what prayer is, and by this same instinct offer it to their gods of wood and stone.

But there is a fact even more significant, and that is, that while this instinctive faith in prayer may be dormant, it can never be obliterated. It is quite possible for a man to live, for years, a prayerless life. He may persuade himself that he is an Atheist, but even *he* will cry out to God, when everything else has failed him. Let a sudden emergency arise, and the buried instinct reawakes. In the hour of sudden danger, when the ship goes down in the black midnight, and the mighty waters are closing over him; on the death-bed, when the awful gulf of eternity is opening before him; under the pressure of some mighty sorrow which has stripped him of all that he has

loved the best, even he will cry to God for pity and for mercy. Theories of brighter and of calmer days are swept away in a single instant, and he knows that there is a God to hearken, even though the time may have passed away when that God will save.

Against this fact of our instinctive faith in prayer, it will probably be objected, that science has discovered that we live in the midst of a system of changeless law, and that while there is a possibility that we misinterpret this universal instinct, there is no possibility that we can be mistaken in dealing with the hard, visible facts of physical law, which, as it is claimed, make it impossible to answer our petitions, except at the cost of the confusion, if not of the destruction, of the universe. The objection may be very tersely stated—Law is inflexible; prayer is, therefore, an absurdity.

We hear very much of late of this changelessness of law, and no one will deny the

*general* uniformity of nature. And yet there are one or two facts, quite as evident as this supposed axiom of science, which deserve to modify the inferences which are drawn from it.

Are we quite sure of the fact that law is *universally* immutable? The question is rather startling, for wherever we look we see evidences of order, and proofs of the regularity of God's work. The grain of sand, driven along the beach by the wind, and the planet revolving in its orbit, are equally obedient to physical forces. So far as we see, these forces are everywhere the same through space; and geology, leading us back through unmeasured time, teaches us that they have been the same for myriads of ages. Law, unless it were uniform, would not be law at all, but only chance.

But are we sure that it is universally immutable? As the created world implies a creator, equally the relation of law involves

a lawgiver. If we say that God *cannot* interfere with the course of nature which He has ordained, we limit His Almightyness, and, therefore, deny that He is God. We make a god of law, stronger than the God of Heaven. If we say that He *will* not interfere, supposing a sufficient cause to require His interference, we are setting bounds to His divine purposes, and limiting Him by our own narrow conceptions of possibility. All that can be said, scientifically, is that experience testifies to a general uniformity in nature, and all that the philosopher can demand of the theologian, in proof of the possibility of a response to prayer, is either to show (1st) that God has at some time modified a natural law for a special purpose, or (2d) that a response to prayer is possible notwithstanding the immutability of nature.

The theologian need not hesitate at either of these requirements.

(1.) There is at least one example of apparent interference with natural law which is most significant. No law is better known than the law by which all material bodies expand with heat and contract with cold. Water, like other substances, obeys the general law at ordinary temperatures. If it obeyed it at every temperature the result would be disastrous. As it approached the freezing point, its density would continue to increase by contraction, and when ice was formed, instead of floating on the surface, it would at once sink to the bottom of the streams, so that the rivers, and the sea itself, would become a solid mass which no summer's sun could ever melt. But God provides against this. He ordains that water shall follow the general law, down to a point about  $8^{\circ}$  above the point of freezing. There the law is actually reversed, and the water between  $40^{\circ}$  (nearly) and  $32^{\circ}$ , *expands* with cold, so that ice floats upon the surface.

Science can give no reason for it, except in the purpose which is served thereby. God has altered one of these so-called changeless laws because He sees the need of changing it. He has not only altered but *reversed* it, and one instance of this (how many others there may be we know not)\* proves that the great Lawgiver holds His

\* There is evidence that this is not the only example of the modification of general law. Iron, antimony, and bismuth present the same phenomenon, and, so far as this law is concerned, they are, I believe, the only instances of expansion by cold, among the infinite number of bodies known to chemistry. I have taken water as an illustration, because in it the purpose is so plainly evident. In the case of iron the importance may be seen almost as clearly, from the purposes served in the arts, and the argument is perhaps even stronger in proving that God may permit exceptions to His laws for man's convenience as well as for his necessities. We cannot see the reason quite so clearly with antimony and bismuth, because we know less of them, but when it appears so plainly in the examples given, he is a bold and most unscientific man who claims that it does not exist in the others, because he does not see it. There may be examples of the reversal of other natural laws, but whether there are or no, one instance is quite enough to prove that law is not beyond divine control.



laws within His own control, and will modify them if need be.

It is equally easy to prove (2) that an answer to prayer may be possible even without touching the immutability of law. Exceptions like that given above, must necessarily be rare, and while they prove that God will modify His laws if need be, such modification, of course, can never be made the ordinary rule of His procedure, consistently with the stability of nature and our dependence upon it. But there is another point, and that is, that special results may be produced by changeless laws, through their combination or opposition. Even with our own limited control over natural forces we continually accomplish this, and the whole theory of mechanics is nothing but the modification of changeless laws to effect special results. Perhaps the simplest illustration is in the law of gravitation. If the hand (*e. g.*) is raised it will fall naturally by the change-

less law of gravitation, but if we will to counteract that law by the law of muscular contraction, it is quite possible to do it without interfering with the immutability of either law.

Thus in countless ways we influence nature and carry out our plans and wishes. We cannot directly bring down a single drop of rain from heaven, yet we can cut down forests, and alter the course of streams, and modify the drainage, and can as surely change the climate, as though, by our word, we could marshal the clouds and direct the winds; and yet in our presumption we dare to say that it is unscientific to pray for rain, because the question seems to be one of natural law, or to ask God to protect our friends at sea, because the question of the safety of the vessel is scientifically a question of the strength of materials, and the power of wind and wave. God is stronger than law. He has ordained it for our good,

and will administer it for our benefit. We cannot, of course, presume to say how it will be done. We have seen enough to know that it can be done, and, therefore, we may come confidently to Him in prayer. We may pray for physical blessings. They can be granted without overturning the course of nature. We may pray for health. He may hear us by giving skill to the physician, by removing the elements of disease—He may grant our petition in any one of a thousand ways. We may pray for everything we need. If it be a real necessity we shall have it, if we pray aright; otherwise He will give us, like a wise and loving Father, some other, richer, blessing in acknowledgment of our request.

To what has been said of the efficacy of prayer, might be added the argument from experience. Men do not long continue any course of action, whatever be their prejudices in favor of it, if it is always barren

of results. If prayer could be supposed to be only a superstition, its continuance from the earliest days of the world would be a miracle, which would test our faith, far more severely, than it can be tested by any supposed response to it. It is significant that it is not those who pray the most, who question most the efficacy of supplication. They who are accustomed to draw near to God are they who believe, with firmest faith, that God draws near to them. They have seen their wishes gratified in strange and wondrous ways. In times of danger, deliverance has come from unexpected quarters. Things have worked together for their good. God has not failed those who trusted Him, but has ever done "exceedingly abundantly for them, more than they could ask or think."

The argument from experience is cumulative, and therefore can scarcely be presented in its full strength; but without entering at all into the question of personal

blessings received through prayer, the existence of the Church, and in our own age, the maintenance of many religious institutions which depend even for daily bread upon daily supplication, is evidence enough that prayer is not in vain. The subject is one, however, which, while it does admit of an appeal to experience, does not admit of the test of actual statistics, since it is impossible to eliminate causes which make statistics, whether for or against the answer to prayer, unreliable. It was this which made the suggestion of Prof. Tyndall, which in 1872 excited so much comment from the press, impossible, and therefore unscientific. A ward or hospital, according to the proposition, was to be set apart for special supplication for several years, and prayer was thus to be submitted to a test which would settle at once and forever, on a scientific basis, the question of its power. The test at first seemed plausible, but it required no great

amount of thought to prove that it was altogether inapplicable to the question which it was meant to solve. At the best, it would deal only with physical results, and leave untouched, mental, moral and spiritual answers to prayer. It also ignored every condition of submission to God's will, and therefore would necessarily be inconclusive. But there was an objection to it which was still more fatal. Prayer, to be effective, must have a direct purpose, and the design of such a test as this, by the very terms of the proposition, could not be to heal the sick, who were to be the subjects of it, but to force God to a demonstration of the efficacy of the supplication made on their behalf, and to require Him to *prove* that which He had left in the domain of the believer's faith. They who remembered that the precept "Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God," given in the early days of Hebrew history, had been reënforced and sanctified by the

Master's lips, in actual reply to Satan, could see in such a test as this, not absurdity alone, but actual blasphemy.

Such, then, are our reasons for believing that our supplication will be heard and answered. We find a promise for our hours of devotion, in the express words of Holy Scripture. We read of many instances where the promise has been marvellously fulfilled. God deigns to explain to us the reason why, at times, the answer seems to be delayed. We find, moreover, that the testimony of Scripture is confirmed by reason. Instinct tells us that God speaks truly when He says, "Ask, and ye shall have." The great objection of modern science disappears before a more careful investigation, and the experience of the Church at large, and of a mighty company of believers, who have communed with God in many sweet and hallowed hours of intercourse with Him, testifies that

His blessing has never failed those who rightly sought it. All strengthen faith. All confirm the promise. Under the weight of testimony, doubt is scattered and every fear removed. The way of access to the throne of grace is open, and we draw near in full assurance of faith, trusting One who is "more ready to hear than we to pray, and who is wont to give more than either we desire or deserve."



## CHAPTER III.

### THE CONDITIONS OF ACCEPTED PRAYER.

*“Do ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss.”* (ST. JAMES, iv. 3.)

IN the preceding pages, reference has been made, more than once, to apparent exceptions of the efficacy of prayer. We have seen that there are cases where our requests seem to meet with no response, and some of the reasons have been incidentally suggested, which prove that these exceptions are only in appearance. The subject is so important that it merits a separate consideration. Since prayer is an ordinance of God, by which He graciously admits us to intercourse with Himself, it can, manifestly, be effective, only when made as He commands it. They who attempt to

come to God in any other way than that which He has marked out for them, or who neglect the conditions on which He has promised them access to His presence, *do not pray at all*, but only offer some substitute of their own, instead of prayer. They are thus outside the sphere of the promise, and the barrenness of their devotions, however much it may witness to their own infirmity and sinfulness, does not even touch the question of the general efficacy of supplication. Many of the disappointments of prayer are thus to be accounted for. God has not refused to hear, but men have failed really to pray. They may have bowed the head and bent the knee, and uttered very proper words of supplication; they may even have felt some faint kindlings of desire in their hearts, but they have neglected one or other of the fundamental conditions of devotion, and God could not therefore answer them, consistently with the laws which

He had laid down to guide them in their approaches to the mercy-seat. It is most important, then, to know what these conditions are, otherwise we may kneel continually, dreaming that we pray, and wondering, or murmuring, because God does not answer us, while all the time—perhaps for days, or months, or years—we have never uttered a single word of actual supplication.

In Holy Scripture the conditions of accepted prayer are plainly set before us. Although the Bible furnishes no systematic discussion of any theory of prayer, nor any set of formal rules, to guide our supplications, it teaches us how to pray aright, as it teaches other duties, by incidental precept, by example, by suggestions and cautions, scattered through its sacred pages, which are sufficient to guide those who are in earnest, and to assure them that they shall not pray in vain.

The most prominent of these is the warning that a moral preparation is needful for effective prayer, and that indulgence in any cherished sin will avert God's countenance from us, and close His ears to our supplications. "Your iniquities," writes the prophet, "have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid His face,"—literally—have made Him hide His face—"from you, that He will not hear." Again, David writes, "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me," and Solomon, "The Lord is far from the wicked, but He heareth the prayer of the righteous." The same warnings are frequently repeated in the New Testament, as, for instance, when the Apostle teaches that we must pray, "lifting up *holy* hands," if we would have our prayers accepted. Besides these general admonitions to holiness, particular sins are specified, as being specially hindrances to devotion. Such are pride,

and vanity, and hypocrisy, and malice, and doubt, and many others. It is most clearly taught that sin is a hindrance to prayer. "The prayer of the wicked is an abomination unto the Lord."

It need scarcely be said that these warnings apply only to the sin which is cherished, or which, at least, is unresisted. Every fault or transgression does not shut the door to prayer. On the contrary, the very highest object of our approach to God, is that we may obtain His forgiveness for the guilt which oppresses us, and no acts of devotion are sweeter and more holy, than those in which we bring the burden of our sin and weakness to the cross of Jesus, and, with humble earnestness, plead for pardon and for cleansing, through His precious blood. Christ Himself bids us pray that our trespasses may be forgiven, and teaches us that the publican who could only say, "God be merciful to me a sinner," was justified. He

who, in the days of His human ministry, permitted the Magdalene to approach Him, and assumed it as His chosen title, that He was "the friend of publicans and sinners;" He who poured out His blood that sinners might be saved, surely never can require that we should be perfect before we pray. This would be to make prayer impossible, and the command to pray a mockery. No! even the most guilty may approach the throne of grace, if they are struggling with sin and resolving, in God's strength, to forsake it; but they who cherish it, and refuse to give it up for Him, loving it better than they love Him, shall draw near in vain to Him, "who is of purer eyes than to behold iniquity." "They may make many prayers, but He will not hear."

Another condition of accepted prayer, is that it shall be *real*; that is, that we shall honestly ask for what we really desire to have. This condition seems self-evident,

and yet, in the Gospel of St. Matthew, we read that our Lord quoted the words of Isaiah, which speak of those who "draw nigh to Him with their mouth and honor Him with their lips, while their heart is far from Him," and His divine comment on them was, "In vain do they worship Me;" that is, such prayer is useless and unaccepted. So far as actual hypocrisy goes, this is very evident, but, apart from conscious hypocrisy, there is a latent power of self-deception in the heart, even of the most sincere believer, by which *unrealness* becomes one of the greatest dangers of the hour of prayer. The words of contrition are often taken upon the lips, while there is very little honest humbleness of spirit. Thanksgivings are repeated almost mechanically. Words of praise are spoken, while the pulses of the heart are not stirred in earnest adoration. Petitions are made without true desire. We fall into habits of expression, saying what is

proper to be said, but often without intention, and sometimes even without any distinct consciousness of the meaning of our words. Prayer is thus formal, unreal, ineffective. But God will hear no supplication unless it comes, warm and glowing, from earnest, fervid spirits. The tribute of formal words, with Him, is less than nothing, for He listens not to the voices of men's lips, but to the utterances of their hearts, and He would ever gladly turn away from the full chorus of formal adoration, and leave it to spend itself, as empty sound, among the arches of the Temple, to hearken with all the untold sympathy of the Saviour-God, to some poor sufferer crying to Him for help in the heavy anguish of a penitent and stricken spirit. True prayer must be always sincere and honest prayer.

Closely allied to reality and honesty in devotion is *fervency*, or earnestness. The miracle of the healing of the daughter of



the Syrophœnician, and the parable of the unjust judge, sufficiently attest the importance of this condition of acceptance. The natural reply to a request which is coldly made, is an answer coldly given. They who come to God as though they had no interest in their own petitions, who are satisfied to pray with wandering thought and vacant countenance, as though devotion were a duty and a burden, can scarcely hope for a gracious answer.

We might profitably speculate, perhaps, upon the emotions which the Holy Angels feel as they see men pray. It has been revealed that they are present in our assemblies, to be "taught by the Church the manifold wisdom of God," but it is greatly to be feared that they have occasion, quite as often, to learn the manifoldness and infinity of His forbearance. They, whose lives are full of love and worship, and whose every breath is adoration, can scarcely fail to mar-

vel, as they see the listless air, the irreverent attitude, the obvious pre-occupation of so many earthly worshippers, and contrast it with the intense and single-hearted adoration with which they are familiar in the courts above. They wonder, it may be, whether the men and women whom they see, can pretend to have come to pray. Is it possible that they are conscious of what they do, or of the awful presence in which they stand? Can they realize that all the happiness of life—all the joy of endless ages—depend upon Him whom they approach so coldly? Why, then, are they not in earnest? Why do they not lift up their eyes to God with some eagerness of feeling? Why do not the lips tremble which dare to repeat His holy name? The Holy Angels are accustomed to render a service very different from ours, and if we, like them, are ever to draw near the throne, it will

only be when we have learned, like them, to be earnest in God's service.

Another condition of accepted prayer is that it is made in *humble submission to God's will*. When the Divine Master gave the pattern prayer to His disciples, He taught them to say, "Thy will be done." When He prayed Himself, in the very darkest hour of His life, He said, "Not as I will, but as Thou wilt." St. John was inspired to teach that this was to be the condition of every prayer. "And this is the confidence that we have in Him," he writes, "that if we ask anything *according to His will*, He heareth us" (1 John v. 14). This condition is clearly an absolute necessity for the exercise of any consistent government of the world. Men are ignorant, and selfish, and inconsiderate, and unless there be one supreme will, bringing all the different lines of desire, and purpose, and design, into harmony, the whole

system of God's government would be in confusion, and all government would very soon become impossible. The condition is therefore expressed or implied in every true prayer, that the request is not contrary to God's will. Every true prayer thus prays to be denied, if the granting of it would be hurtful to us, or subversive of God's glory. In one sense this is a limitation, since we may not receive everything that we ask for, in the precise form in which we asked for it. It is a limitation which guards us from what would hurt us; but, on the other hand, it leaves everything within the control of One, whose wisdom is infinite, and whose love for each of us is boundless, and thus insures us of the most effective care and help. No one would consciously pray for hurtful or worthless things, and therefore, if such a prayer is ignorantly offered, God treats us as a loving Father treats his child, giving that for which we

would make request if we could "know even as also we are known." If we could see as God sees, we should pray for what God gives. He never fails to respond to prayer by blessing, but not always by the special imagined blessing that is asked, unless He designs to punish us. *Thus* He answered Israel's prayer when "He gave them a king in His anger, and took him away in His wrath," and when, in the desert, "He gave them their desire, and sent leanness withal into their soul." They who would complain because God does not deal thus with them, must have strange conceptions of His wisdom and His love.

An accepted prayer will also be made in *Faith*. We scarcely realize how little faith there usually is in prayer, and very often ask for blessings with little honest expectation of receiving them.

A characteristic illustration of this occurs in the Acts of the Apostles (ch. xii.) When

St. Peter was in prison, we are told that “prayer was made without ceasing of the Church to God for him.” The prayer was heard; the prison doors were opened, and the apostle found himself at liberty. Going naturally to the place where the disciples were gathered, still praying for his deliverance, he knocked at the gate, and the attendant, recognizing the familiar tones of his voice, in glad surprise forgot to open the gate, but ran in and told them “how Peter stood at the gate.” Their reply was remarkable. They do not say “God has heard our petitions.” “Prayer has prevailed to deliver St. Peter from captivity.” On the contrary, they are utterly incredulous, and say to the attendant, “Thou art mad.” “It cannot be St. Peter at the gate. We know that he, at least, is fast in prison.” “But she constantly affirmed that it was even so.” Still they cannot credit it, though this is the very thing for which they had just

been praying. It is easier for them to believe that some spiritual manifestation has taken place, than to credit that their prayer has been heard, and so they say, "It is his angel." Meanwhile St. Peter continued knocking, "and when they had opened the door, and saw him, they were astonished." Such is too often the lack of faith which even true believers exhibit. Underneath professed dependence upon God's acceptance, there is a reservation of doubt. Prayer is made without confidence, forgetful that the promise is, "Whatsoever ye ask in prayer *believing*, ye shall receive."

Our prayers must also be offered *in the name of Christ*. Of this our Lord reminds us, when He says, "Whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do. . . . If ye ask anything in my name, I will do it." To ask in the name of Christ, is, of course, not simply to conclude our supplications with any given formula, as though it were

a spell or incantation, but it is to recognize and feel that whatever God gives, in answer to petition, is given only for our dear Lord's sake, and in the worth of His all-sufficient merit. It is still more than this. They who, of old, cast out devils "in the name of Christ," did it by the power of Christ, and we who use the same sacred name in prayer, are drawing near to God, as they whom Christ has authorized to come to Him, pleading that what is done for the disciple, may be regarded by the gracious Master as done for Him. It is a privilege, whose priceless worth it is hard to estimate! We might well fear to approach the throne, if we felt that God was looking down upon the nakedness of our own unworthiness, but when we come into His presence, commissioned to say, "I am redeemed by Christ; I shelter myself beneath His righteousness; I plead His merits; His holiness is my heritage; I pray because He has authorized me," then



may we draw near with full assurance, for God looks not upon us, but upon Christ in us, and "He is the beloved Son in whom God is well pleased."

Such are some of the conditions of accepted prayer. We can all fulfil them, and fulfilling them we are sure of the blessing. "The Father Himself loveth us," and we may come to Him with confidence, and rest ourselves upon His love in full assurance. He will not refuse us. We may pray imperfectly. We may have no readiness of utterance, but He will not repel us, nor deal harshly with us. An earthly father does not repel his child because he comes with lisping tongue and broken utterance. Love, like strength, is made perfect in weakness. Parental love is manifested most, not to the child who asks most logically, but to him, who, in his helplessness, has the greatest need. The little infant, who cannot speak at all, can plead more eloquently than all

the rest, by the outstretching of his little hands and the pathos of his upturned baby face. If our prayers be but the lisping of a child, God will hear and bless them. "If ye then being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in Heaven give good things to them that ask Him?"

## CHAPTER IV.

### THE INTERCESSION OF THE SPIRIT.

*“ Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.”* (ROMANS viii. 26.)

IN addition to the promise that God will hear us, if we pray aright, and the knowledge that He has graciously taught us the way of access to Himself, something is still needed to enable us to draw near to Him with the fullest assurance of acceptance. The conditions of true prayer, as we have traced them in the very words of Holy Scripture, are by no means easy to our imperfect, fallen nature. Holiness, honesty, fervency, submission, faith, reliance upon Christ, are not at all the features of the natural human

heart, and lacking these the wings of prayer are so shorn and fettered, that our petitions cannot reach the heavens. If prayer is to be effective, then, there must be some power beyond our own to help us in it. Superhuman strength must supplement our weakness. God must not only bow down His ear to hear us, but He must also extend His hand to help us.

This necessary aid has not been withheld by Him who bestows upon us "all things that pertain unto life and godliness." Even under the old economy it was recognized that "the preparations of the heart in man, and the answer of the tongue is from the Lord" (Prov. xvi. 1), and the Church was taught to anticipate still greater gifts of blessing in the advent of One who was to be revealed as "the Spirit of grace and of supplications" (Zech. xii. 10).

A definite exposition of the promise of God's help in prayer is given by St. Paul

in the Epistle to the Romans.\* “The Spirit,” he writes, *i. e.*, the third Person of the Blessed Trinity, “helpeth our infirmities; for we know not what we should pray for as we ought.” We are ignorant of the proper *subjects* of prayer—of “*what* we should pray for;” and of the right *method* of effective supplication—of “*what* we should pray for *as we ought.*” “But the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us,” with an intensity of fervor which human words alone are utterly inadequate to express, “with groanings which cannot be uttered.” The Holy Ghost blends His petitions with our imperfect prayers, praying in unison with us, sustaining us and lifting up our hearts unto the Lord, so that our supplications can rise above the darkness and the discord of this world, into the presence of Christ, our Great High Priest, who receives them, and marking them with the signature of His cross, offers

\* Romans viii. 26-28.

them, in the merits of His own prevailing intercession, before the throne of God, making every faithful prayer effective, however tremblingly the lips may utter it, however "compassed with infirmity" may be the heart which turns itself to God. Hence, he argues, we may have the most unwavering confidence in the certainty of God's response, "He that searcheth the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit, because He maketh intercession for the saints, according to the will of God." A prayer inspired by God Himself, and offered through the aid of the Holy Spirit, is necessarily above the danger of refusal from its imperfection or its ignorance. God Himself prays with us, and, therefore, the apostle adds the assurance—not indeed that we shall have every hurtful and foolish thing that we may have desired—but that the course of providence shall be so ordered for us, that we may have what is wisest and most loving. "We know that

all things *work together for good*, to them that love God, who are the called according to His purpose." And, again, he asks in fullest confidence (verse 31), "If God be for us, who can be against us?"

The direct, effective help of God the Holy Spirit is thus promised to our prayers, and we only need to assure ourselves that we comprehend what it is, and the means by which we may assure ourselves of its all-sufficient aid. In the apostle's exposition of it, the prominent feature, which can scarcely escape our notice, is, that he speaks of what God the Holy Spirit does for us, not as though it were a substitute for our own exertion or devotion, but rather as though it were some gift of grace, through which the supplications that we offer are made acceptable and prevailing. "He *helpeth* our infirmities." Now *help*, very plainly, may be of various kinds. One may help another, for instance, by telling him what to

do, in any difficulty or emergency ; or by speaking cheering words to comfort and encourage him ; or by removing difficulties or hinderances ; or by giving what is requisite for his task ; or, in a word, by doing anything, which promotes in any way, the special work which he may have in hand. In our English version of the Bible, the promise of the Holy Spirit's help, is therefore still somewhat indefinite. The word which the apostle actually uses, in the Greek, however, has nothing of this uncertainty of meaning. It is one of those picturesque words, which we so often find in Scripture, which bring before us graphically the precise meaning which the sacred writer intended to convey. Literally, it represents the act of one who comes to us, as we try to lift some heavy weight or burden, who puts his hand upon the other side, who thus divides the weight with us, and so enables us to raise, what otherwise, would have



been beyond our strength. This defines, most accurately, what the Holy Spirit does for us in prayer. He does not substitute His prayer for ours. He does not lift the weight, instead of us, while we stand idly by, but He comes to us when we are let and hindered by our infirmities, to give us that exact measure of help, which, with the faithful exertion of our own power, will make our prayers effective. When He sees that we are weak, He puts forth, for us, His Almighty strength. When we feel that the burden of our wants and sins is so heavy, that we cannot bear it to the mercy-seat, which seems so distant in the hour of depression and distress, then He extends His hand to help to bear the weight, and though the hand may be unseen, the human spirit feels that the burden upon it has been lightened, in some mysterious way, and that it can go on, confidently, to the very footstool of the throne.

And this explains St. Paul's meaning when He calls the Spirit our intercessor. For the expression is unusual, since intercession is ascribed to Christ everywhere in Holy Scripture, except in the single instance of the passage which we are considering, and we are told that there is but "*One* mediator between God and man," so that the Holy Ghost can never make intercession for us in the sense in which our Lord makes it. But the sphere of the Spirit's intercession proves His work to be so totally distinct from that of our great High Priest, that it has nothing in common with it, except the common purpose of ministering to our salvation. Christ pleads for us in Heaven; the Spirit is upon the earth, influencing our spirits and helping us to pray. The intercession of the One is before the throne, in the centre of the ranks of angels and archangels, which reflect the glory of the light which no man may approach unto, as the clouds reflect

the sunlight; the intercession of the other is in the dark and corrupt recesses of the human heart, where forms of evil come and go, and where the angels, if they come at all, come shudderingly, lest they should stain their purity with the evil everywhere about them. The one is an intercession addressed to God the Father; the other, on the contrary, appeals to man in his weakness, and only with and through man to God. Christ pleads His merits for the world, which, without that pleading, would have been swept away, long since, into the blackness of eternal darkness; the Holy Spirit pleads with us, that we may raise our eyes and heart to see, as St. Stephen saw, the opened heavens, and the Saviour standing at the right hand of God, and that, as we see the blessed vision, so full of hope and promise, we may be moved to gratitude, to love, to faithfulness, to zealous effort. In a single word, the intercession of our Lord

is to turn God's face *down* to us, that He may look upon us with pitying and forgiving love; the intercession of the Spirit is to turn our faces *up* to God, that we may look to Him, with penitential and fervent pleading, that so, seeing eye to eye, we may return His look of love, "loving Him because He first loved us."

The Holy Spirit's work, so far as it regards our prayers, is thus essentially a work of helping. He guides us in our ignorance. He kindles our fervor. He makes our prayer acceptable. He prays in unison with us. He alters what is asked amiss. He strengthens what is weakly asked. He completes what is asked imperfectly. He *translates* our prayers, as it were, into the language of Heaven, and those prayers are heard "because He maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God."

Since His influence is exerted through ourselves, it is of course impossible to de-

fine accurately the limits of His operations, or to separate the divine and human elements of prayer. All that we can say is that God's Spirit acts with ours, in every faithful supplication, and by His divine power gives it strength and fervor. And this need not surprise us, for God never permits us to mark out the exact limits of the divine and human, when they act together, and the mystery of their union, in our devotions, is parallel with many kindred mysteries, in the Gospel system.

In our Lord's own nature, for instance, no man can tell precisely what acts are to be ascribed exclusively to His Deity, or to separate them sharply from those which are within the range of the power of His humanity. Some are very plainly human, as His weary slumber on the deck of the Jewish fishing-boat ; others are quite as evidently divine, as His power to still the storm which had arisen while He slumbered ; yet who will dare

to mark out the precise line where the weakness of His humanity was merged into the boundless power of His Deity?

The same mystery of the union of the divine and human is evident in the inspiration of the Bible. We trace the individuality of the sacred writers, and equally we trace the informing and directing power, by which they "spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost," and yet who will attempt to separate the one from the other?

The mystery is again repeated in the doctrine of the Holy Eucharist. There is an outward sign and there is a spiritual grace, but the sad history of ages of discussion, in which the feast of the Redeemer's love has been the battle-field for the bitterest controversies which have divided Christendom, witnesses how impossible it is to define the method of their union.

Even in the personal religious life, we meet with additional illustration of the

same universal fact. Every man, who has been brought out of the darkness of his natural state, into the marvellous light of God's loving favor, will confess that he has been saved by the influence of the Divine Spirit, leading him to Christ; but it is quite safe to say that he will also confess that he cannot distinguish, and shall never be able to tell, how far the great change is due to the direct and immediate operations of God's grace, and how much may properly be ascribed to that grace working through the re-awakened energies of the heart which had so long been cold and dormant. Things which, at the time, seemed spontaneous, are afterwards seen to have been divine. Things which once appeared accidental, are now very plainly recognized as the leadings of God's Providence, and all that can be said is that God's power was guiding the soul, which, in the perfect independence of its own humanity, was found "willing in the day of God's power."

In the special case of prayer, then, it is impossible, as it is quite unnecessary, to define the limits of the divine and human. When the Holy Spirit comes to help us, to put His hand beside ours, to lift up the burden of our heavy hearts, we cannot tell how much of that burden is borne by Him, and how much by ourselves, as the consciousness of our wants kindles the fervor of our devotion. It is sufficient to know that the blind are "led by a way they know not." God the Spirit does not substitute Himself for us, but He helps us, acting by means of our own personality, and working *in* us rather than *for* us. He guides us, while we scarcely realize, in our waywardness and ignorance, whither He is leading; but the path at last comes out, often to our great surprise, just where the treasury of His love is hidden. We know that our prayers are quite inadequate to secure the blessings that we need. They are cold and formal, and stained with sin. At best, we have nothing to offer



as the price of blessing. There are but a few loaves and fishes, and they are altogether insufficient for the feeding of the multitude of our necessities and desires; but He touches the poor provision which we make for the thronging crowd of our wants, and not one of them is left unsatisfied. Oh, wondrous promise! Well may we thank God that help has been laid upon One who is so mighty. Well may we thank God that it is "the Spirit"—that it is God Himself—who "helpeth our infirmities."

The apostle teaches us the energy and effectiveness of this divine help, by adding that the Spirit's intercession is made "with groanings which cannot be uttered"—with an intensity of pleading, which far exceeds the deepest pathos of all human utterance. Examples at once occur to us in which even spoken words are infinitely pathetic, and yet we are taught that the Spirit's pleading is still more persuasive and prevailing. Un-

der the pressure of some great calamity—in the sore sense of need—in great emergencies—who does not know that the outcry of human lips may have such pathos in it, that even the hardest heart will melt in sympathy? How fervent, for example, is the mother's prayer, as she kneels by the bedside of her dying child, and prays in her anguish that God will be pitiful, and in His mercy will spare that precious life for which she would gladly give her own! How intense is the strong man's cry, when inevitable death stares him grimly in the face, and the darkness of the unknown future—so near and so mysterious—forces him to cry to God for mercy! How earnestly will the awakened sinner plead for pardon, when his eyes are opened to comprehend the meaning of the second death, and he realizes that he stands upon the hot and crumbling borders of eternity! Surely there are times when human lips can utter prayers which

are infinitely earnest. And yet the greatest intenseness of desire with which any mortal ever cried to God—though the groaning of his spirit may have been deep and agonized and bitter—is no measure for the infinite fervor with which the Holy Spirit seconds every faithful supplication, for He “intercedeth for us *with groanings which cannot be uttered.*” Who, then, can doubt the acceptance of the prayer which He has deigned to help? “If God be for us, who can be against us?” Such is the glorious promise. The Trinity to whom we pray, is with us in our prayers—God the Spirit, as the intercessor in our hearts—God the Son, as the great High Priest to offer our supplications in the merits of His precious blood—and God the Father, who Himself loveth us, to hear our cry and to send the blessing for which we ask.

## CHAPTER V.

### LOYALTY TO PRAYER.

*“Continuing instant in prayer.” (ROMANS xii. 12.)*

OUR meditations upon prayer have thus far led us along three distinct and very different lines of thought. First, we examined God's promises, and found that He had pledged Himself to hear every faithful suppliant, and to grant his requests so far as they might be found consistent with His wider knowledge of the right and good. Next, we reviewed the conditions, through which supplications might be offered with acceptance. These, as presented plainly in the words of Holy Scripture, clearly required nothing except that which was quite within the reach of every one who was

faithful and in earnest. Lastly, we turned to the assurances of God's help in supplication, and found that the Holy Spirit's promise had been given, that He would plead in unison with us, so that our prayers might reach the throne, and be presented there, as sweet incense, through the all-prevailing intercession of Christ our Lord.

It may not be inappropriate to supplement these thoughts, by a few simple and homely suggestions, intended to make the times of communion with God more real and fruitful. These suggestions lie upon the very surface of the subject, and are, naturally, familiar to every child of God, in his experiences at the Mercy-seat. But their triteness matters very little, if, by the blessing of the Holy Spirit, they serve to deepen convictions already formed, or to guide our self-examination as to the fidelity with which we use this privilege of prayer; so vitally important, for faith and holiness

and love—for comfort and assurance in the present life, and for pardon and acceptance in the life to come.

The words at the opening of this chapter—one of those terse and emphatic precepts so characteristic of the writings of St. Paul—may serve as a convenient centre, around which to group our concluding thoughts. “Continuing instant in prayer.” We often pass over this precept, as though it only meant that we should pray often, and with a certain amount of fervency. It does mean this, but it also means much more. No single English word is precisely equivalent to that which the translators of our Bible have rendered by the phrase “Continuing instant.” In the Greek, it is a single word, and implies literally, to be “staunch or steadfast at,” “to attend constantly upon with diligent attention,” “to wait upon.” We shall probably come nearest to its meaning, if, without searching for any

synonym, we use a totally different word, and interpret the precept *figuratively*, as though the apostle were exhorting us, to bring to the custom and practice of devotion, that same feeling of fidelity, which we call LOYALTY, when it is applied to a person, a principle, or a conviction. He says, in effect, "Be ye *loyal* to prayer," that is, not only pray fervently and often, but watch for everything which will minister to your devotion. Have faith in prayer and enthusiasm for it. Make full proof of it. Use it well and rightly.

And here a wide field opens before us, in the suggestions which might be made, as to the loyal use of prayer.

It would not, for instance, be entirely superfluous, to remind, even mature believers, of the need of considering the *subjects* of their requests, and to suggest that we are loyal to prayer, only when we make known every want to God, however trivial it may seem. We confess, in words, it is

true, that we may pray for everything that we need—for temporal gifts as well as for spiritual blessings. In theory, we believe that, as nothing is too great for the power of God, so nothing is too little for the infinite tenderness of His Providential care ; but too often, when we attempt to translate our doctrine into practice, our requests are limited either to general petitions, or to those which we think least unworthy of the great Being whom we address. Forgetting that, as in nature, He bestows the same care upon the little flower hidden away among the grass, as upon the planet which shines brightly in the midnight sky, so in grace He watches the smallest interest of the humblest saint as lovingly as the apparently greater interests of the Church at large, we hesitate to bring before Him those wants, and fears, and cares, which seem so trivial, even to ourselves.

Take, for example, that petition which,



most properly, stands at the beginning of all our supplications—the plea for the forgiveness of our sins—and how often, even in our private devotions, do we satisfy ourselves with the general confession that we are evil, and hesitate to lay bare the fearful record of all our waywardness and wickedness! We are ready to say, “I have sinned”—but how seldom do we say, “*thus* have I sinned—in this neglect of grace—by this act of selfishness—through this unhallowed temper—by this uncharitable word—or this unclean imagination—or this unholy deed. By these special acts, I have sullied the pureness of my baptismal robe of grace, and nothing but Thy blood, O Saviour, can ever wash away the stain.”

If we could only bring ourselves to tell the whole story of our sins, in all its detail, to the compassionate Redeemer; if we could only cast aside those general confessions of guilt, which mean so little, and open the dark

chambers of the soul to the purifying light of God's presence, what streams of heavenly radiance would flow in upon our hearts! Then should we know, indeed, the sweetness of our dear Lord's forgiveness, for He would touch every sore and wounded spot, with the healing balm of His restoring grace, and we should grow strong, through Him, to resist the evil and to attain the good. Never, until we talk of sin to Him, just as we feel it; until we ask for His pardon and defense, just when and where we need them; never, until we tell Him of temptation with faithful and honest words, shall we know the true power of prayer, for never until then, shall it be to us that perfect shield which shall defend us in every spiritual danger, and that abundant source of grace which shall secure us every needed blessing.

And what is true of the manifold necessities of the spiritual life, is equally true of all

those *temporal* blessings, which come quite as really from God, as do forgiveness and grace. We have no right to feel that anything, however trivial, is beneath God's notice. If it be a thought and care to us, it is equally a thought and care to Him, however inconsiderable it may be in itself. We smile, sometimes, as we hear a little child, in its artless faith, asking God for things so insignificant, that it seems almost irreverent to name them in His holy presence, and yet the petitions of those little lips are probably quite as worthy and acceptable as our own more formal prayers. If we could trace those childish prayers, doubtless we should find that the Holy Spirit thinks it no humiliation to plead in unison with their requests, and that our Lord Himself presents the simple plea among the prayers of saints, as perhaps the sweetest of them all. Such are the prayers which God will bless, and the more that we can

pray like little children, telling what we want in plain and artless language; going to Christ with every care, and plan, and hope, and desire, bringing Christ closely down to us as the companion of our lives, the more sure shall we be to receive the fullness of His blessing as the recompense of prayer.

The prayers which we make for our own necessities, however, should not be by any means the whole of our devotions. Too often they engross nearly all our thought and fervor, and we pray *selfishly*, as though we should be content if we receive a benediction for ourselves, whatever be the condition of all the world besides. But we are bound together in a brotherhood in Christ, and others have place in our prayers, not by courtesy, or through friendship, but of actual right. The pattern prayer begins, "*Our Father.*" The command, that "intercessions be made for all men," is repeated, as

often and distinctly as the precept of any other duty. Its obligation is clear, positive and universal.

The beginning of the claim of others is, of course, with those who are in *our own households*. We can confer no greater blessing upon them than that which comes down from God through prayer. But it has also a far wider range. Our *friends* have a right to a place in our supplications. It may be that through our ministry some load of grief may be lightened, some hidden sorrow comforted, some fierce temptation turned aside; some wanderer may be reclaimed or some child of God endowed with richer measures of His grace. We should pray also for our *enemies*. God, in answer to our supplication, may bring them to a better mind. We should pray for the *Church of God*. Who can tell whether our single supplication may not be the means, ordained from all eternity, to

turn the tide of battle between sin and holiness. We should pray for the *sick*, the *sorrowing*, the *sad*. The answer may come in some gift of comfort or of resignation, which will bring light and peace to a darkened life. And there is one prayer, which many of God's people never think of, but which seems to be of quite as much importance as all the rest. We should pray, day by day, in every supplication, fervently and faithfully for the DYING. Day by day, souls are going through this last mysterious trial. Never do we kneel, at any time, when there is not some one, somewhere on this earth, in mortal agony, with the dark future, and all the dread uncertainty of the unknown world close before it. Each of us can help that soul. We can shield it from some temptation. We can secure some added ray of light to relieve the darkness of the valley. We can bring down to it, some angel messenger, burdened with mes-

sages of peace and hope and comfort. Who would neglect to confer a blessing so priceless? When our turn shall come to die, we would give worlds to know that God's people, over all the earth, were asking grace for us. We then should pray for others, dying now; and, in the ages of eternity, we shall receive our reward in finding debtors to our earnestness, waiting as friends to welcome us into heavenly habitations.

But loyalty to prayer will direct, not only the subjects, but also the *times* of our devotion. Nearly all men, who are not utterly indifferent to prayer, are accustomed to pray in the morning and in the evening, but, with many, these are the only times of devotion. And yet these are certainly not enough to satisfy the soul which is truly devout, or to enable it to realize the privilege of that communion with God which must be constant and faithful to be effective. Where it is possible, each day should have some

special hallowed time with which nothing should be permitted to interfere. Where it is not possible to secure the seclusion or the opportunity for such stated formal prayer, the hindrance must be compensated by that constant spirit of devotion which enables us to lift the heart to God, in every trial, in the intervals of leisure, when temptation comes, when doubts or fears arise, at the beginning or the end of any special undertaking—in a word, all through the day, whenever opportunity is given. Of course, neither the spoken words, nor the attitude of prayer, are necessary. It is only the uplifted heart, the request silently made known to God, the secret communion of the soul with Him. No life can be so busy, that such devotions as these must be crowded out; and even these will secure a blessing, if they are all that can be offered.

There are two examples of God's response to prayers like these—brief hurried



ejaculations offered up in the midst of other pressing occupations—which are so remarkable, that they well deserve to be treasured up by those who are tempted to complain that worldly cares and duties are hindrances to devotion.

The first of them is from the early history of God's people. The Hebrews had just fled from Egypt, and the way in which God purposed to deliver them from the anger of the Egyptians was still unrevealed. Circumstances seemed to threaten them with inevitable destruction. They had come to the borders of the Red Sea, and the unparted waters before them were an impassable barrier. "They were entangled in the wilderness, the sea had shut them in." On the one hand were mountains which could afford no refuge, on the other, mountains and deep caverns which they could not pass. Behind them were the hosts of Pharaoh, determined to bring them back to servitude or to destroy

them. Their great leader, still firm in his faith that God would deliver them, was speaking to them, trying to calm their fears and to communicate his confidence to them. There seemed no time for prayer in the midst of this anxiety and confusion. And yet, in the intervals of Moses' speech, we learn, incidentally, that he was pleading with God in intensest supplication. (Exodus xiv. 15.) The petition could have been no more than a single thought of prayer, an ejaculation going up to heaven, pleading for deliverance, while he was still speaking to the people, and yet it sufficed to secure the safety of all that mighty company. "And the Lord said unto Moses, wherefore criest thou unto Me, speak unto the children of Israel that they go forward." His prayer had been heard. The command to advance was given, and as the Hebrews pressed onwards towards the sea, a path was opened for them through the waters.

The second example is scarcely less re-

markable. Again it is from Israel's history. A thousand years had passed, since the Exodus, and they were, once more, in captivity. The prophet Nehemiah was cup-bearer to the King of Babylon, and one day, as he went about his office, thinking sadly of the desolations of Jerusalem, the king noticed his depression, and asked its cause. The prophet answered, "Why should not my countenance be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' sepulchres, lieth waste, and the gates thereof are consumed with fire?" Then said the king, "For what dost thou make request?" Now mark the illustration of the power of a brief, earnest prayer. The interval between an oriental monarch's question and a courtier's reply, could be but an instant, yet that instant was long enough for the prophet to turn his heart to God, and to plead for help, for we read, "*So I prayed unto the God of heaven. And I said unto the king: if it please the king, and if thy servant have found favor in thy*

sight, that thou wouldst send me unto Judea, unto the city of my fathers' sepulchres, that I may build it." (Neh. ii. 1-5.) The request was granted, and that single thought of prayer, so short that it could be crowded in between a question and an answer, was the proximate cause of the second deliverance of a whole nation from captivity, for the result of the visit of Nehemiah to Jerusalem was the rebuilding of the Holy City, and the restoration of the Jews to their land and worship.

A busy life is therefore no excuse for a prayerless life. God is not to be found, only in the Church, or in the seclusion of the closet, but He is ready to meet with us wherever our duties lead us. He is quite as near His children in the household, or the crowded street, as in the temple or the oratory. Wherever we may be, the heavens are still above us, the loving eye still watches us, and the gracious ear is still bowed down to hear us. If it be

possible, we need to have a stated time for prayer, and nothing can compensate for the neglect of this ; but, if the day is filled with occupation, if others are so constantly with us that we cannot be alone, at least we may have a prayerful spirit, lifting up our hearts to God from time to time, and when the evening hour comes, and the busy world is stilled, then, in the solitude of our closets we must make up, so far as may be, for the deprivation, by greater earnestness and fervor.

Continue instant in prayer. When Moses came down from the Holy Mount, where he had talked with God, his face was bright with heavenly glory. As Christ was *praying*, He also was transfigured before the disciples.

Surely the lesson is, that no face is ever lifted up to God, but it catches something of the radiance of the world of light—that no one ever returns from communion

with the Father, without bringing with him some brightness for the darker hours of life. We must live near to God if we would have the power of God manifested in us. We must be loyal to prayer if we would prove that prayer is power. Then for us, too, the light shall shine in darkness. The efficacy of prayer shall demonstrate itself by a thousand gracious answers. In every doubt we shall find a clue to guide us, in every danger a power to defend us, and in every fear, a gracious friend and Father, whose words of sympathy are not less clear because they are gently whispered to the soul in tones which the world has no ear to hear. For us life shall have no chances, death no terror, the future no uncertainty. Committing all to the faithful God, who graciously permits us to make known our requests to Him, we shall know in Whom we have believed, and He will repay our trust, for He will guide us with His counsel, and after that receive us into glory. ✓







